

would appear that the identity of the bird was, at best, unproven, and that all three eggs are of uncertain identification. Baker's account (1894) was accepted by Roberts (1992), but he unfortunately misprints the date as 1984!

The other Davidson egg is quite unlike the others, being smaller, white with a cap of light sienna spots round the large end. It is said to have been obtained in north Cachar at an unspecified date, and Davidson obtained it from the collection of Col. Rattray. As there is no other authentication for its identification, it cannot be accepted unless other similar eggs are found. I think it is probably spurious, but as both the egg types attributed to this species occur in others of the genus, no definite statement can be made on this point.

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Thus, it appears that there is no authentic description of the nest and eggs of this species, and if a field worker in the area were able to provide one, it would be a most important addition to the literature.

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# Finn's Weaver *Ploceus megarhynchus* and Singing Bushlark *Mirafra cantillans*: two new species for Nepal

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## FINN'S WEAVER *Ploceus megarhynchus*

Sukila Phanta Wildlife Reserve (28°53'N 80°11'E) lies in the far west of Nepal and is the westernmost protected reserve of Nepal. The reserve has three different kinds of vegetation namely Sal forests, riverine forests and grasslands, the last being the most interesting and of the greatest ecological interest. Grasslands constitute almost half of the reserve's vegetation. Sukila Phanta proper is the largest protected patch of continuous grassland in Nepal. It is approximately 16 km<sup>2</sup> in area. There are other phantas (open patch of short grasslands) in the reserve which are smaller but equally important for birds. These are Singhpur Phanta, Karaiya Phanta, Dudhiya Phanta, and some smaller phantas near Jhilmila.

In the eastern half of Sukila Phanta the grassland is damp and has large areas of marshes and pools. It remains inaccessible for most of the year but in the driest months a domesticated elephant can take one through some parts. A big area (4.5 km<sup>2</sup>) of marsh in the northeast corner is not penetrable by any means of surface transportation. Thus there are still areas in the reserve which have not been visited by any ornithologist.

While carrying out my field work on grassland birds of Sukila Phanta Wildlife Reserve I spent a few weeks in the reserve. On 8 May 1996 I joined the reserve's patrol team, with their elephants, which were passing through an area which had not been visited by any ornithologist before. While going towards the southeast sector of the grasslands at Sukila Phanta, I observed five weavers perched on tall grass reeds. These birds were more thick-set than Baya Weaver *Ploceus philippinus*, and all had completely yellow underparts. In the flock at least two birds were brighter

yellow than the others. The brighter ones were obviously adult males and duller individuals either immature males, or more likely, females.

While going further east I spotted another flock of six birds of which three had bright yellow underparts, forehead and rump, with contrasting dark ear-coverts and brown back and wings. The other three were duller like the birds in the previous flock. I provisionally identified them as Finn's Weavers *Ploceus megarhynchus*. Both flocks were observed for roughly five minutes from the top of an elephant. I was using 8 × 30 at 25 m range in the second observation. Sketches were made for further consultation.

Later reference to Ali and Ripley (1987) confirmed the identification of the species. The sketch fully agreed with the Finn's Weaver illustration. The all-yellow underparts, forehead and rump are salient characters of Finn's Weaver. I am quite familiar with the other three species of *Ploceus* which occur in Nepal and in Sukila Phanta. The Baya Weaver *Ploceus philippinus* does not have a yellow chin and throat in any plumage. These were observed in large numbers (c. 2,000) going to roost in the evening at the same site. Black-breasted Weavers *Ploceus benghalensis* do not have any yellow extending below the breast. They have a dark breast-band in all plumages. Streaked Weavers *Ploceus manyar* do not have yellow underparts in any of their plumages. Finn's Weaver also occurs at Kaladhoongi, Uttar Pradesh only 50 km west of Sukila Phanta (Ali and Crook 1959).

The habitat was dominated by vast grasslands of *Saccharum* with associated Narkat *Phragmites karka*. The grassland was dotted with medium-sized trees and termitaria as tall as 3 m. Ripley (1982) describes 'pure terai country where marshes, sarpat grass and *Saccharum* are

sparsely dotted with isolated trees' as the habitat of Finn's Weavers. This description fits the habitat at Sukila Phanta nicely.

It is of interest to note that, recently, this species was found south-west of its localized range and was recorded nesting at Okhla, Delhi on 1 June 1993 (Robson 1993). Speculation that the sightings at Delhi were of escapes from cages may not be true. Our present observation supports the idea that these birds may disperse widely, especially in the breeding season.

Studies into the ecology of the species were made in the 1960s (Ambedkar 1969). Apart from this, their behaviour, ecology and distribution has not been studied recently. It still remains a little known bird. It has been listed as a specialist grassland species in the Indian subcontinent (Majumdar and Brahmachari 1988, Rahmani 1988).

Although this record constitutes the first outside India, its status in Nepal remains unclear. It may be a vagrant, a summer visitor to Sukila Phanta or a resident species previously overlooked. Further visits to the reserve in the summer months might help to solve this question. There is an unconfirmed report of the species from Koshi Tappu on 18 February 1993 (Fourage 1993), which was described to have all yellow underparts. Previously the bird was reported to be an endemic resident to India with a very local distribution (Ali and Ripley 1987, Collar *et al.* 1994). Finn's Weaver is a globally threatened species and listed as Vulnerable (Collar *et al.* 1994).

#### SINGING BUSHLARK *Mirafra cantillans*

On 8 May 1996, while carrying out a grassland bird study at Singhpur, Sukila Phanta Wildlife Reserve, I noted a *Mirafra* species in the morning and wrote it down in my diary as 'Rufous-winged Bushlark: 1 (pale individual)'. It was paler in comparison with Rufous-winged Bushlark *M. assamica*, with which I was familiar from Chitwan, Nepal. I thought that it might be an individual of a paler subspecies of *M. assamica*.

Two were seen again on 14 May, which I simply noted down as Rufous-winged Bushlark. The birds were similar in shape and size to *M. assamica* but differed in colouration and behaviour.

On 17 May 1996, I devoted the whole morning to taking detailed notes on the field characters, behaviour, song and flight pattern, and habitat of the lark. The following notes are extracted from my field diary of May 1996, December 1996-January 1997 and May 1997.

Comparisons were made with Oriental Skylark *Alauda gulgula*, Rufous-winged Bushlark *M. assamica* and Indian Bushlark *M. erythroptera* (the last being extralimital to Nepal).

**Field Characters:** Bill shorter and thicker than that of *Alauda gulgula*; pale brown. Faint white eyebrow; eyes and eyebrow pattern differed from *A. gulgula* (which also occurs in Sukila Phanta). This individual much stouter and shorter (*A. gulgula* slimmer and longer). Breast buff-coloured, but whitish throat and upper breast distinct, especially when singing (not rich fulvous as in *M. assamica*). Wings less

round (?), lighter-coloured than those of *M. assamica*. Head and upper back greyer than *M. assamica*, rufous on primaries visible on the wing in some individuals. Legs pale flesh-coloured. Outer tail-feathers distinctly white, noted very carefully on several occasions in at least 10 individuals (*M. assamica* and *M. erythroptera* have buffy outer tail feathers). Characteristic head-pattern of *A. gulgula* lacking.

**Behaviour:** Not shy, bolder than Rufous-winged Bushlark. Most were seen singing. A few were seen carrying food but nests were not searched for.

**Song and song flight:** The song was very prolonged and varied quite different from that of Rufous-winged Bushlark. The bird would shoot up in the air c. 20-30 m. and then it would start hovering and singing.

**Habitat:** Dry grasslands, height of grass less than 30 cm in average.

In May 1997, two birds were trapped in mist-nets and measurements were taken. The wing lengths were 77 and 81 mm and the weights were 18 and 19.5 gm respectively. The birds were photographed in the hand (Plates 1 and 2) and in the field. Their song was taped for further confirmation.

I would like to thank Dr Jan Wattel and Tim Inskipp for commenting on this paper. My work was funded by the Grassland Bird Study Project.

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Plates 1 and 2. Singing Bushlark *Mirafrca cantillans*, Sukila Phanta, Nepal, May 1997

## Co-operative breeding by Collared Falconets *Microhierax caerulescens*

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The five species of *Microhierax* falconets are the smallest raptors in the world and show no obvious sexual size or plumage dimorphism (Kemp and Crowe 1994). The species probably replace one another ecologically across their Asian distribution (Clark 1994, Kemp and Crowe 1994). Most species are poorly known but all are reported to occupy the forest canopy and to occur at least sometimes in small groups. All are reported to capture their prey mainly on the wing, either in flight or plucked from foliage. Insects form the bulk of the diet, together with a few small birds and lizards (Clark 1994). Combined hunting behaviour and food sharing has been reported for one species (Kemp and Crowe 1994) and this posed the question of what roles might be performed by group members when breeding.

Observations were made during 10-12 April 1996 at a nest of Collared Falconets *Microhierax caerulescens* found in the Huay Kha Khaeng Wildlife Sanctuary, western Thailand. The nest was about 3 km south-west of the Khao Nang Rum Research Centre, at 15° 36'N 99°19'E. The nest was in one of several larger trees that grew just off the crest of a low ridge in dry deciduous dipterocarp forest. Trees in this forest were only about 15-20 m high but for a few larger emergents. The overall impression of the vegetation was of numerous bare tree trunks up to about 10 m, topped by an uneven and partly open canopy. The

ridge with the nest tree was among the foothills of the Thanon Thongchai mountains, which run north-south down the Thailand-Myanmar border. Adjacent to the ridge was denser, taller bamboo and evergreen forest. Further details of the sanctuary have been described elsewhere (Nakhasathien and Stewart-Cox 1990).

The nest was discovered at 15h00 on 10 April. It was watched from then until dusk at 19h00, from 17h00 to dusk on 11 April and from 06h30 (half an hour after dawn, local sunrise 06h55) to 11h00 on 12 April. The nest was situated about 12 m up in an old woodpecker or barbet hole, near the top of the slender trunk of a live 20 m high *Shorea obtusa* tree with a dbh of 25 cm. A second cavity was evident about a metre below. There were a few streaks of white droppings on the lower rim of the entrance hole. The hole had an estimated diameter of 4 cm, sloped slightly downwards and the entrance tunnel was an estimated 4 cm before the start of the nest cavity.

The nest contained two chicks on the point of fledging. They were attended by five adult birds. The presumed breeding female was most recognizable; her centre pair of rectrices moulted to leave an obvious gap and her underparts always ruffled. She was also obvious because, on emerging from the nest where she spent most of the time, she always preened actively, spread the tail to show